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GAYLAX

Empowering eXpressions



THE QUEER AGENDA



Credits

GAYLAXY

Empowering Expressions

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Editor's Note

India celebrated 4 years of decriminalization of homosexuality this year. But how has the life of queer people changed in these 4 years? Away from the hum-drum of pride parades and parties, gay men and women are meeting over social gatherings based on their interests and hobbies. The numbers of such groups are increasing across various cities in the country. Some of these groups are also becoming a second family to them. Our cover story explores how queer people are re-defining what being gay in India is about. This apart, Dr. Himadri Roy gives an interesting insight into how post 2009, with increasing awareness, there has been objectification of gay men.

Pakistan is also taking baby steps towards LGBT awareness. Hadi Hussain reports about Taan, a new TV series that will soon be hitting the Television screens in Pakistan and would also be dealing with the issue of homosexuality. Another campaign called "Mujhe Tumse Kuch Kehna Tha" was launched in Pakistan to reach out to other queer people in the country through social media and deliver the message of hope to them. Read more about this campaign inside the issue. Junaid Jahangir, a Canadian educationist who writes regularly on issues facing queer Muslims on Huffignton Post Canada, was in Pakistan recently. Hadi talks to him about his work, the difficulties he faces –both from Islamists and queers- and the impact it is having.

India's first transgender music album is going to be released soon. For the first time, transgender people from different backgrounds have come together hoping to inspire others through the songs. The death of iconic Bengali film maker Rituparno Ghosh shocked us all and was a great loss for every cinema lover. Kaustav says his final goodbye to him through his post. For the book lovers, there is a review of the book The City of Devi.

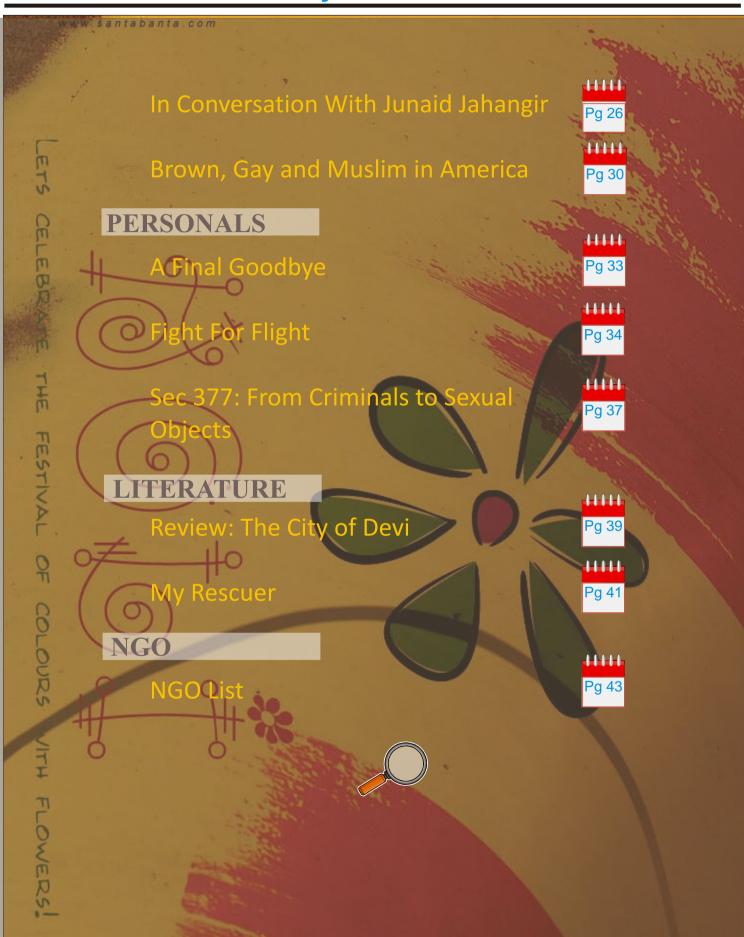
That's all from my side. Just in case you are wondering, our next issue will be carrying pictures of the Chennai and Kolkata Pride. Until then, take care.

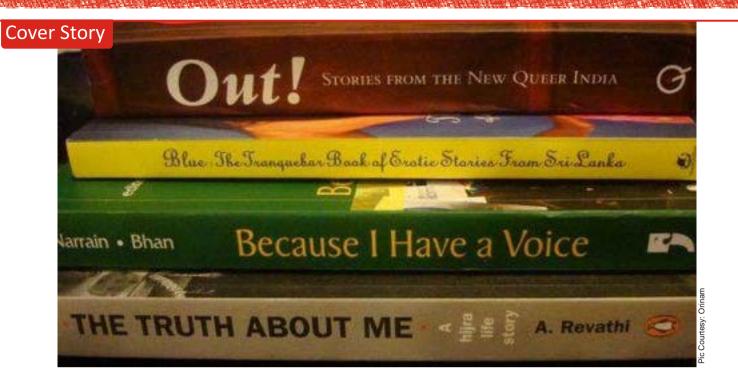
Love, Sukhi

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THE QUEER AGENDA

Sukhdeep Singh explores how queer people across India are coming together for things apart from pride parades and film festivals

hen Aayush came out to his neighbour, he was gifted a queer fiction book, which generated the hunger and curiosity within him to read more of queer literature. But among his own friend circle, queer themed books were seldom discussed, neither was he comfortable talking about such issues to his friends. "In such a situation, I felt deprived of the opportunity to read books that fascinated me," he says. Naren, a 35 year old man from Bangalore, always felt the gaze of people around him in the dance school that he joined, and this did not let him learn the moves fully. "I was hesitant because my moves used to be feminine and I used to get weird looks," he tells.

Naren and Aayush aren't the only people who have felt left out due to their sexuality in groups and activities they have always been interested in. Many others too feel that they have to suppress a part of themselves and that

queer themes or issues are often over looked in such groups.

When homosexuality was decriminalized in Indian four years ago, there was a spurt in the number of parties being organized in cities, both big and small. This has been followed by film festivals and pride parades in many cities. But are such annual events enough for exploring one's interests? Is there more to a gay man than just parties and parades?

As India becomes more and more open and accepting of people with alternate sexuality, queer people are meeting other likeminded people at events apart from film festivals and parties. There have been an increasing number of groups and people who have come together based on their interests in various cities across India. For many, it is also a good way to make friends and form their own social support group. The number of such groups have grown in the past two years across



India, and many have turned into a monthly, if not a weekly, meet.

Social Groups in the Past

It is not that there has been a sudden awakening among queer people in the country. Groups like Gay Bombay (GB) and Good as You (G.A.Y) have existed for over a decade in Mumbai and Bangalore respectively; providing a place for queer people to

meet together and discuss about things at a time when for a large number of gay men, meeting other men from the community would largely be for fulfilling sexual desires. Both the groups started as a safe space to meet queer people, and have also helped nurture other groups today.

Good As You held its first meet in February 1994. Prior to that, most gay men would meet at bars or pubs, which were not the best setting to discuss LGBT issues. "It was thought that instead of meeting at a bar where no one is discussing anything LGBT, why don't we take it offline," says Vinay Chandran, a prominent figure in the LGBT circle in Bangalore. From then on, Good As You meetings have been held every Thursday from 6pm at Swabhava Office in Bangalore. "Thursday was chosen as it was neither the beginning of the week, when a lot of people have work pressure, nor was it the end of the week when people start making weekend plans," he tells.

Gay Bombay was started in Sep 1998, as a safe space where people could discuss things apart from sex. After being online for some time, GB held its first offline meet at a McDonald's in Mumbai, and later shifted to the house of one of the members. Soon, first and last Sunday of every month became reserved for a GB meet in the calendar of many people. In these 14 years, GB has conducted various events including parties, treks, picnics, film festivals, parents meets, cooking meets, kiteflying, speed dating brunches, raksha bandhan, special meets on topics like safe sex,

HIV/AIDS, relationships, depression, finances, Section 377, and much more.

Vikram Doctor, a founding member of Gay Bombay says the group has only kept pace with the demands of people and expanded likewise. While film screenings

now have over 150 people attending it, other events of Gay Bombay are equally popular and have an attendance of more than 60. Vikram observes that a lot of young and college going people have started attending the meets since 2009, and have also been demanding parents meet where they could talk to a parent and understand what coming out to their own

A number of people attending this meet are also those want to speak to a mother to find out want someone of their generation thinks and get to know what coming out to their own parents could mean for them



family could "We mean. realized that many parents too need help and started organizing meets where parents of gay kids could talk other t o parents. A number o f people attending this meet are also those want to speak to mother to find out want someone of heir generation thinks and get to know what

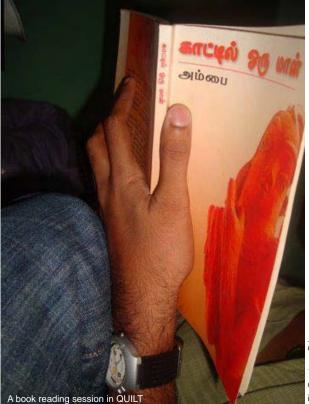
coming out to their own parents could mean for them," he says.

Nakshatra, who has been attending the GB meets for last one year, says attending these events have made him more confident and helped him come out openly. "The first meet that I attended was Art meet, with paintings on LGBT theme. It was amazing! I never thought there could be such a thing for gay people. We presented wonderful art, and the thoughts behind every picture were unique. It made me confident." Nakshatra points out that in each meet of Gay Bombay, one can spot at least 10 new faces. To make everyone comfortable, often chits are given out for people to write their questions anonymously. All chits are then collected in a box and answered one-by-one.

Sport Groups

While Gay Bombay and Good As You are informal groups for people to just come and share their feelings, groups with specific

agendas are slowly coming up and gaining popularity. One of the earliest of such groups is GRAB (Gay Running and Breakfast), which has been in existence in Bangalore since 2005. Vijay and Arvind Narrain, both fitness enthusiasts, realized that while there were avenues for parties and serious discussions in the city, there weren't too many places where people could meet on a neutral ground and focus on exercise. "In the West there are sports groups, chorus groups. We just wanted to start such kind of a club in Bangalore. We both started running at Cubbon Park and then would have breakfast ... It would be a kind of gettogether too. Some informal interaction as well as focus on exercise," tells Vijay. The runners meet at Cubbon Park around 9 in the morning every Sunday, and after an hour of running and exercise, gather at Airlines Hotel for breakfast around 10 or 10:30 am. Over the years, the breakfast part has become popular, and while there can be anywhere between 4 to 8 people jogging/running, the count shoots up to 25 at Airlines, with many coming directly for the breakfast.



Courtesy: Orinam

Another sport related group that has come up in Bangalore recently and has been gradually gaining popularity is the Queer Bowling League. The group meets every Wednesday for a session of Bowling in the heart of the city, and now has more than 10 people turning up each week.

Literary Meets

Books, they say, are a man's best friend. While books, whether fiction or otherwise, can help you understand a lot of things, queer themed books aren't something that receive much attention in general discussions.

Although various book clubs exist in many cities, it was a common complaint that they don't discuss queer themes often and there is unease around discussing such books. Rohini Venkatesh Malur, who started Queer Reads Bangalore, highlights the issues faced by queer people, "If you join a nonqueer book club sometimes



there can be issues about being out, or if you happen to be talking about queer issues, you might not be in a safe environment." Moreover,

for many people, their social upbringing and conditioning often leads them to feel ashamed about discussing such things in public and involves a long struggle of self acceptance. Dr. G Shankar, a book lover and an Associate Professor with a leading private university,

narrates, "My queerness is femininity in my walk, talk and gestures. Like many others, I have been conditioned early in life to believe that my queerness is something I have to be ashamed of, hide or to be covered up by some other forms of behavior or compensated by other achievements!" "It took me a lot of thinking, before I bought my first book on queer themes... When I bought Pink sheep in my home town, I was looking at the shop keeper's eyes to see if he looks at me with curiosity! I think it is a step-by-step process, considering the gueer-o-phobia I have also been made to swallow!" he adds. Dr. Shankar now attends QUILT, Orinam's Queer Literature group in Chennai that has been meeting every month since Dec 2012.

"It is a place for likeminded people, who would want to share their passion in book reading and passing on the same to others. Also it's a safe space to interact and get to know people beyond books," says Senthil, who

If we join a different book club, we are not necessarily going to read these books. This is the only one where you know for sure that you can talk about LGBT issues and books for certain



Pic Courtesy: Orinam

was the force behind QUILT. "If we join a different book club, we are not necessarily going to read these books. This is the only one where you know for sure that you can talk about LGBT issues and books for certain," explains Rohini. "Literature has provided a good entry point for discussions around issues that are close to the community, from gender norms to struggles with the closet, to relationships," points out L Ramakrishnan of Orinam.

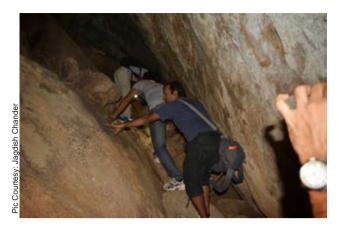
Bangalore also hosts a poet's meet every 1st and 3rd Monday of the month. Called Monday Mushaira, members of the group meet at a coffee shop at Koramangla where they read out poems, both original compositions and works of other poets.

Treks and Picnics

The more adventurous ones are venturing out for treks and picnics, which can be a great way to explore places and develop friendship as well. A trekking group in Chennai existed under the Orinam umbrella. "We were a group of Orinam members who are naturelovers and would rather spend holidays trekking in Western and Eastern Ghats' wilderness, wading in streams and sleeping in tents pitched on mountain slopes and mountain peaks than hitting bars and clubs," says Ramakrishnan. Gay Bombay too has been organizing treks and picnics to places near Mumbai. "Our last picnic, we had so many registrations that we had to hire two buses!" tells Mr. Doctor.

In Bangalore too, a group of gay men went for a small trek to Antargange, a place 60 km from Bangalore and known for its caves and rocky hills. Narendra Sinha, who went on the trek along with four others, says it was a remarkable trip and that he would be looking forward for more such queer outings, "It was something unforgettable and it turns out to be one of the most memorable events I have been through." The group is planning for their second trek soon. In Kolkata too, PPK (Pink Parties Kolkata) had organized a picnic last year. Similar treks and picnics have also been organized in Hyderabad. Kite Flying was the





first major outdoor event that was organized by Wajood two years back, and has seen a steady stream of people coming in ever since for the event.

And it is not just the independent,

bachelor gay man who is seeking support and friends. Married gay men in Bangalore also meet every 2nd and 4th Saturday of the month. The challenges faced by these men are different and unique, but they are

often judged harshly by others in the community, making it difficult to discuss their life with others and find support. "Married people mostly don't come to other meets because they feel they are being judged at, so they try to come and socialize here and discuss their problems. Since everyone is in similar kind of situation they feel comfortable coming here," tells Naren, who has been married for 10 years now. Interestingly, a significant number of people attending the meet are those who are under pressure to marry and want to understand the consequences if they were to marry a girl.

Providing a Platform

These hobby/interest based groups have not only helped people develop a sense of family and community, but are also turning into platforms to showcase individual talent. Gay Bombay recently organized a film screening where various films, including one short movie made by Nakshatra, were

screened. This was followed by a discussion with the audience. Buoyed by the response, an ecstatic Nakshatra says, "There were around 150 people and there was no place to even stand. I guess it is special for me to have my films receive such an amazing response. My family was there and people were cheering me and were supporting a local film maker and GB gave me my spot. My film was screened next to Rituparno's film!!"

Similarly, Pink Divas, a group of gay men who meet every Friday in Bangalore to learn dance, performed at the Bangalore Queer Film Festival 2013. Monday Mushaira also provides a platform for young and emerging poets to present their work. Quilt too has had people reading out their own short story. "We also

have a small question round during every meet. The purpose is to understand or mould our characters, if at all we have plans to pen a novel or short story in future, or even non-fiction," tells Senthil.

How many of these groups will eventually survive shall depend on the perseverance of the members too. Vinay informs that a lot of informal groups had started in various cities around the time when Good As You came up, but only a few survived eventually. "What a group like this really requires is someone to open the door and stay there, just in case someone finds the courage to walk in. People who stayed for two hours (in G.A.Y.) could be themselves and this was like a home to them. There are certain rituals we perform in our life, for a lot of people, Good As You has become a ritual in their life," he says.

As Nakshatra tells, for many, these groups are now like a second family, where people discuss trivial to serious issues, things they can't share with their straight friends or biological family. "It is a place where I felt really comfortable in the company of queer people who have eventually become good friends," confides Aayush, who now attends the meetings of QUILT.

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Study Reveals Global Attitudes Towards Homosexuality

Hadi Hussain reports about the new Pew Research Center study about attitudes towards homosexuality across the world

On June 4, 2013, an American based organization, Pew Research Center released its report regarding the global attitudes towards homosexuality. As a fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world, Pew has been conducting research on various issues of social and political importance through public opinion polling, demographic research, media content analysis and other empirical social science research.

The recent report entitled, "The global divide on Homosexuality" reported that countries which are affluent and secular have greater acceptance for homosexuality. The sample- collected from 39 countries across globe- showed that European Union countries reported the maximum acceptance

over homosexuality with Spain (88%). Germany (87%), the Czech Republic (80%), France (77%), Britain (76%), and Italy (74%) sharing this view. Although Poland was the only EU country surveyed where views were mixed; 42% say homosexuality should be accepted by society and 46% believe it should be rejected. Same trend was observed among Latin American and North American countries but it is the Asia/Pacific region, where views of homosexuality were mostly negative. Also, people in Africa and in predominantly Muslim countries remained among the least accepting of homosexuality. In sub-Saharan Africa, at least nine-in-ten in Nigeria (98%), Senegal (96%), Ghana (96%), Uganda (96%) and Kenya (90%) believed homosexuality should not be



accepted by society. Even in South Africa where, unlike in many other African countries, homosexual acts are legal and discrimination based on sexual orientation is unconstitutional, 61% say homosexuality should not be accepted by society, while just 32% say it should be accepted.

Overwhelming majorities in the predominantly Muslim countries surveyed also reported homosexuality should be rejected, including 97% in Jordan, 95% in Egypt, 94% in Tunisia, 93% in the Palestinian territories, 93% in Indonesia, 87% in Pakistan, 86% in Malaysia, 80% in Lebanon and 78% in Turkey.

Moreover, the report also showed that there was a strong relationship between a country's religiosity and opinions about homosexuality. There was far less acceptance of homosexuality in countries where religion is central to people's lives – measured by whether they consider religion to be very important, whether they believe it is necessary to believe in God in order to be moral, and whether they pray at least once a day.

However, there were some notable exceptions. For example, Russia and China received low scores on the religiosity scale, which would suggest higher levels of tolerance for homosexuality but in reality only 16% of Russians and 21% of Chinese reported that homosexuality should be accepted by society. Conversely, Brazilians and Filipinos were considerably more tolerant of homosexuality than their countries' relatively high levels of religiosity would suggest.

Also, in most of the countries surveyed, views of homosexuality did not differ significantly between men and women. But in the countries where there was a gender gap, women were considerably more likely than men to say homosexuality should be accepted by society. In Japan, Venezuela and

Greece, where about six-in-ten women said homosexuality should be accepted (61% in Japan and 59% in Venezuela and Greece), fewer than half of men shared this view (47%, 44% and 47%, respectively). About half of women in Israel (48%) expressed positive views of homosexuality, compared with just 31% of men. And, while majority of women and men in Britain, Chile, France and the U.S. said homosexuality should be accepted by society, women were more likely than men to offer this view by at least ten percentage points.

Moreover, in many countries, views of homosexuality also varied across age groups, with younger respondents consistently more likely than older ones to say homosexuality should be accepted by society. Age differences were particularly evident in South Korea, Japan, and Brazil, where those younger than 30 were more accepting than those ages 30-49 who, in turn, were more accepting than those ages 50 and older.

For example, in Japan, 83% of those younger than 30 say homosexuality should be accepted, compared with 71% of 30-49 year-olds and just 39% of those 50 and older. Similarly, 71% of South Koreans in the younger age group offered positive views of homosexuality, but just about half of 30-49 year-olds (48%) and 16% of those 50 or older do. In Brazil, about three-quarters of those younger than 30 (74%) say homosexuality should be accepted, compared with 60% of those in the middle category and 46% of those 50 or older.

Results for the survey were based on telephone and face-to-face interviews conducted under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates International. Survey results were based on national samples. The study excluded India citing concerns about the survey's administration in the field.

G- News



India

- Newly elected Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah announced a new monthly pension scheme for transgenders in the state budget that he presented. Under the "Mythri" scheme, trangsenders will be paid a monthly pension of Rs 500. Read more
- ♣ BJP expelled former finance minister of Madhya Pradesh Raghavji Bhai from the primary membership of the party after his domestic help Rajkumar Dangi accused him of sexually exploiting him.
- **②**DMK chief M Karunanidhi has asked the Centre to rectify the 6th Economic Census forms and drop number 9 as the code assigned for transgender in the gender identity column. In Tamil Nadu, the number 9 has a derogatory undertone and is used to tease the community. Read more
- Renowned Bengali director and actor Rituparno Ghosh died of a heart attack at his residence in Kolkata on May 30th. Winner of 12 National Awards and various international awards, Rituparno's films often dealt with complex social issues. Read more

G-NEWS: World

- Cory Monteith, best known for playing Finn Hudson in the popular TV series Glee, was found dead in a hotel room in Vancouver, Canada on July 13th. Read more
- Ounited Nations launched a global public education campaign for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) equality called Free and Equal on July 26th. The Free and Equal campaign will raise awareness of homophobic and transphobic violence and discrimination, and promote greater respect for the rights of LGBT people everywhere. Read more
- The Sindh High Court (SHC) has been requested to direct the Pakistan government to act against a gay Pakistani citizen who has reportedly married a man in Sweden. Read more
- •Vietnam's Ministry of Justice has announced that it supports the proposal to remove a clause in the 2000 Law on Marriage and Family

which bans same-sex marriages. Read more

- •Pope Francis has said gay people should not be marginalised but integrated into society. "If a person is gay and seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge him?" the pope said.
- **o**Britain?has legalized same-sex marriages in the country.
- In a landmark ruling, the US Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act as unconstitutional, restoring equal federal rights to all married same-sex couples in the country. The court also declined to rule on Proposition 8, effectively allowing same-sex marriage in California. Read more
- Ovincent Autin and Bruno Boileau have become the first gay couple to be married in France after same-sex marriages were legalized in the country. The marriage ceremony was held in the city of Montpellier considered the most gay friendly city- amidst heavy security. Read more

BEFORE YOU BAREBACK

Dr. Uttam Dave apprises you of the dangers of bareback sex

Barebacking means having sex without using a condom. It is one of the most dangerous things gay men can do. As a way of achieving sexual satisfaction, it is the oldest way, but you need to keep an open eye, now that we are in the 21st century. Until the arrival of AIDS gay men hardly ever used a condom. In fact it was a done thing to ejaculate into your partner's body, whether it was his mouth or his anus. Things changed after AIDS appeared in the scene. Most of the men began having protected sex.

Younger men are more attracted to barebacking. Probably they haven't watched the slow death of their gay lovers and friends. To them AIDS is probably history. That's too

Gay men who are acutely and chronically depressed are far more likely to indulge in unsafe sex then men who are not

bad. We k n o w AIDS is fatal and you too can be a victim.

Let's look at barebacking from another perspective. Emotional problems influence a gay man's sexual behaviour. Depression is the main culprit. Gay men who are acutely and chronically depressed are far more likely to indulge in unsafe sex then men who are not. Excitement seekers are another category who indulge in unsafe sex. If you are a depressed or an impulsive man, you need to do two things-

- 1. Take medications
- 2. Seek Psychotherapy.

If you have a gay friend who is endangering his life by barebacking, instead of criticising him, think if he has an emotional problem. Take him to a Psychotherapist.



So, how as a gay man should you fulfill your sexual desires? If you are going to have sex, carry condoms. Have them in your bedroom. Insist that your partner wear a condom if he is going to penetrate you. Be sexually assertive and say, `Put the condom on or put the clothes on`. Never give in to a man who says, `You can penetrate me without rubber`. You can be sure that he must have said that to all his sex partners.

In case you do bareback under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, be sure to get tested after a month. If you test negative, then get tested again after two months. If you do test positive, treatment with AZT is available.

There will be a day when condoms will be no longer necessary, but that is after the production of a vaccine. Till that time if you are having sex with a stranger, no matter how sexually innocent or handsome he may look, NEVER HAVE SEX WITHOUT A CONDOM. If you are a pair of sexually faithful partners, you need not worry about AIDS or STDs.

Dr Uttam Dave is a Sexologist & Relationship Counsellor for Straight Men and Women, Gays and Male Bisexuals. He practices at Andheri(W) and can be contacted at daveuttam7@gmail.com.

FINDING THEIR VOICE

India's First Transgender Album

Through a music album, transgender singers hope to inspire others and assert their identity, reports Dhrubo Jyoti

"The moment I stepped out of the studio, I felt a new energy in me; I knew I could make a name for myself like everyone else," says Ankur Patel, one of the nine artists collaborating in "Songs of the Caravan" -India's first music album featuring trans people.

Produced by the Jeevan Trust in collaboration with the Planet Romeo Foundation, Netherlands, and the Abhivyakti Foundation, the album was the brainchild of Anubhav

Gupta, director of Jeevan Trust. "People have a stereotypical conception of music by transgender people, pedalled also by Bollywood, where we learn to view them as comic relief. My views started to change when I started working with HIV issues," Anubhav admits.

The album has a pan India feel with singers drawn from all corners of the country, including Bengal, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Manipur, Gujarat and Delhi. The songs too hail



from myriad styles, from Hindustani classical to Pop to Carnatic classical and Rabindra Sangeet. The album also features self-composed poetry. Gupta has planned a gala release on August 10 in New Delhi. "I wanted to show that they are trained. Music has no language, belongs to everyone, and hence, no discrimination can be justified," he says.

The name of the album was conceptualized keeping in mind the unique nature of the lives many transgender lead. "Most transgender lead uprooted lives away from their families with their own groups, *tolis* and/or find solace in organisations that are working with them. Songs of the caravan reflects these musings, dreams and desires, their happiness and their joys and sorrows in this journey. It is the journey of their spirit," explains Gupta.

The singers hail from diverse backgrounds. Some of them are formally trained, like Amitava Sarkar from Bengal, others, like Kalki Subramanium from Tamil Nadu, aren't trained but have grown up on western music. The album has been recorded in a unique fashion, with singers recording their songs in their respective cities.

Although some of the singers are transgender activists, they have found the going difficult, even with learning music. "While I was young, I was forced out of the music class because the parents of other children were not comfortable with their kids learning music with me," rues Akkai Padmashaili, who works with Sangama in Bangalore. Akkai performs the famous Lakshmi Stuti, *Bhagyada Lakshmi Baramma*.

Many of the singers faced a variety of hardships through their lives. "Discrimination against me started in school, as early as class 5. When we were taught about sexual parts in science, boys would tease and ridicule me. Even my teachers abused me sexually. My



Visharad in music got stalled since I couldn't find a job," says Ankur Patel from Gujarat. The Vadodara resident completed her Visharad (music degree) later and has performed a self-written and composed song, which she says "reflects her life's journey."

However, some of the singers are still in the process of finding an affirming identity. "My



current situation is difficult. I am in the closet. I am married and have children and yet I live a full transgender life in secret," says Madhurima, a singer from Andhra Pradesh.

As we see increased activism from erstwhile marginalized sexualities, the initiative to let

trans people express their selves through music has caught the imagination of the participants themselves. "People think if I am transgender I will automatically be ready to have sex with them," says Rani from Delhi. "Through my music, I want to tell people that everyone should be respected for their differences."

Amitava Sarkar, who received a degree in Rabindra Sangeet under the tutelage of Suchitra Mitra, performs "Jodi tor dak shune" by Tagore among her two songs in the album. "I chose the song to inspire my sisters towards moving alone if there is no one to help us," she says. Her words sum up the experience of Caravan most succinctly, "Through my song I have to influence people around trans-issues and at the same time give a message to my own people towards raising their self-esteem."



Mujhay Tum Say Kuch Kehna Tha Pakistani Gays Speak Out

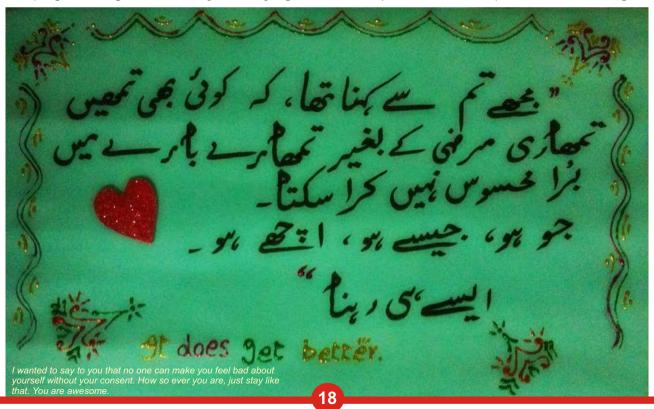
The closet door is being opened in Pakistan with a new campaign, writes **Sukhdeep Singh**

he closet door is being opened in Pakistan. In an attempt to break the silence around homosexuality in the country, and reach out to people with their messages, The O Pakistan has initiated a social media campaign by the name of *Mujhay Tum Say Kuch Kehna Tha* (I Wanted to Tell You Something) - a queer to queer conversation on Facebook. The campaign aims to bring queer fellows together, with a message of support for their fellow queer folks all over Pakistan and elsewhere, in order to show hope, solidarity and assurance that they aren't alone, as many others like them are out there who have also been through all this.

The O Pakistan has been previously involved with low profile events, but Mujhay Tum Say Kuch Kehna Tha is their first public campaign through which they are trying to

engage conversations between gueers across the country and elsewhere and are also trying to build up a social support group online. The idea for such a campaign came from similar campaigns held on Facebook supporting feminism and humanism in the country. "After observing the reaction and opening up of the debates and discussions regarding 'I Need Feminism' and 'I Need Humanism' campaigns on Facebook by students of various Pakistani universities, we got the idea of starting another discussion about the lives and existence of queer folks in Pakistan while highlighting their problems and issues with a message of support and hope," says Hadi Hussain, a member of O Pakistan!

Within 15 days, the Facebook page for the campaign has received over 150 likes. Participants send their photos with messages,





written in English or Urdu, which are uploaded on the page. So far it has got a very good response from the public who are appreciating this bold step coming from a deeply conservative and traditional Pakistan, where colonial era penal code 377 can be invoked to criminalize anyone who is found guilty of indulging in any sexual activity 'against the law of nature'. Homosexual behavior is considered 'haram' and 'sinful' and strictly prohibited in Islam in Pakistani society. Organizers are aware of the security risks involved in this campaign and therefore decided to post all the messages anonymously. "Security threats or an online backlash is expected and it is very much part of the gueer narratives in Pakistan, so one can't get away from it. That's why we requested and posted all the messages

anonymously as we don't want to jeopardize the lives of the contributors," tells Mr. Hussain.

This is not the first time that social media is being used to assert the identity and presence of a persecuted community. In 2011, after Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

denied existence of gays in the country, activists from Iran started a Facebook Page called We Are Everywhere, where they posted pictures and videos asserting the fact that they very much exist. Another Facebook page titled "Iranian LGBT community | Yes people! we Do exist" also posts pictures and



messages of Iranian people (queer and ally) supporting the LGBT community. Pakistan was one of the countries which opposed LGBT Rights in the UN last year, and in a recent Pew Research study, emerged as one of the most homophobic countries.

The activists remain hopeful that they will be able to engage people in healthy discussions on the topic. Messages and submissions can be sent to

mujhaytumsaykuchkehnahai@gmail.com.



PAKISTANI FILM WINS BEST DOCUMENTARY FEATURE AWARD AT KASHISH 2013

organ directed by Michael Akers from the USA won the Best Narrative Feature Film at the 4th KASHISH Mumbai International Queer Film Festival that concluded on May 26th. The award, which has a cash prize of Rs 30,000 sponsored by acclaimed actor Anupam Kher and his school for actors, Actor Prepares, was handed out at a glittering closing ceremony of the festival on Sunday evening. "We thank the festival for its amazing work in helping to bring film's such as ours to the audiences who desperately need it." said Akers.

The Best Indian Short Narrative film award was won by *Urmi* directed by Jehangir Jani. The award carried a cash prize sponsored by Kher and Actor Prepares. "This is my first award for a film but feels like a lifetime award," said Jani, who is also a noted painter and sculptor. The award was given by renowned filmmaker Kalpana Lajmi.

Actor Crystal Arnette won the first KASHISH Best Actor award, instituted by Kher and Actor Prepares. "Bringing this wonderful character to life was an amazing experience," said Crystal Arnette.

A n u p a m K h e r emphasised his support to KASHISH, "As a Chief Guest last year at Kashish 2012, I was really amazed at the quality of cinema that I got to see. Sponsoring awards for Kashish is our (Actor

Prepares') way of acknowledging their efforts for a better Cinema with little means."

Hide and Seek (Chuppan Chupai) from Pakistan won the Best Documentary Feature award. The film directed by Sadat Munir and Saad Khan is one of the first films that focus on the lives of the gay and transgender community in Pakistan. "Due to the subject matter I knew I won't be able to get much public screening of this film in Pakistan, but I'm happy that it screened in India, especially Mumbai, where picture of LGBTIQ acceptance is not the same as elsewhere in South Asia. This award means a lot to me and my team, thank you once





again to the Kashish Team and the prestigious Jury," said Saadat Munir.

The Best Documentary Short Film award went to the Cambodian film *Two Girls Against The Rain* directed by Sopheak Sao. The Best International Short Narrative Film Award went to *Polaroid Girl* directed by April Maxey from the USA.

The awards were judged by an international jury panel comprising noted filmmaker Aruna Raje Patil, Bollywood actor and model Simone Singh, theatre director Quasar Thakore Padamsee, author and poet Jerry Pinto and Iris Prize director Berwyn Rowlands.

The Riyad Wadia Award for Best Emerging Indian Filmmaker was shared by two young directors Manva Naik for her film *Dopehri* and Rohan Kanawade for *The Lonely Walls* (*Ektya Bhinti*). The award sponsored by Wadia Movietone carries a cash award of Rs 15,000 and was handed out by Riyad's mother

Nargis Wadia.

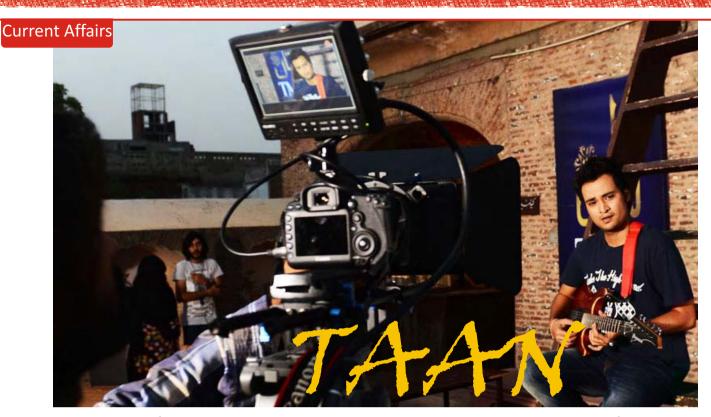
"Both these films are very different from each other," noted Roy Wadia, Director, Wadia Movietone and special jury for the Riyad Wadia Award. "But each tell their story in an honest, compelling way, combining solid screenplays with fine performances and technical prowess, all the more remarkable given these filmmakers are at the very beginning of their careers.

The award ceremony was a glittering affair with electrifying performances by the Dancing Queens who paid a tribute to Bollywood actor Madhuri Dixit, contemporary dancer Bhumika and Bhavin Gala and students from his dance academy. A short film Riyad Remembered directed by Ashish Sawhny was also screened at the closing to commemorate India's first gay film maker Riyad Wadia on his tenth death anniversary.

India's top fashion designer Wendell Rodricks handed out the KASHISH trophy to graphic designer Prachi Patil-Kotkar, who had won the KASHISH International Poster Contest. "Kashish has become an important part of movement towards greater visibility of LGBT community," said Wendell, who added that he would personally add Rs 20,000 to Prachi's cash prize.

KASHISH Mumbai International Queer Film Festival since its inception in 2010, has provided a platform for screening LGBT films from India and around the world in a mainstream space. It is today South Asia's biggest and most mainstream LGBT film festival and one of the first such film festival to receive approval from the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. The festival was held at two venues between May 22-26, 2013, at Cinemax Versova, a mainstream multiplex at Andheri West and Alliance Française at Marine Lines.

"I was deeply touched by the response KASHISH elicited this year. It was a momentous affair - with humongous audience turnout, jam packed shows, engaging panel discussions, great celebrity turnout, huge media buzz and above all, a loud and clear appreciation of the films that were shown. It is a testimony to the fact that there is a great need for screening and discussing queer cinema and for greater understanding of LGBT lives," said Sridhar Rangayan, festival director.



Pakistan's Answer to Glee

A New Glee like TV Series in Pakistan is set to tackle social taboos, including homosexuality, reports Hadi Hussain

midst the rise of religious extremism and violence, leaving little or no space for liberal and progressive individuals and movements to develop, Pakistan is going to create a benchmark with its adaptation of renowned American high school musical Glee by the name of Taan. Shot in the cultural capital Lahore, with a backdrop of music academy, Taan talks about the lives and relations of a bunch of young individuals who regularly burst into songs. Apart from reworking on almost 100 classic Pakistani songs to suit modern tastes, as Glee does, Taan talks about a range of sensitive social issues like same sex love and desire between two men to the love affair between a religious extremist and a Christian woman.

While talking to AFP, producer Nabeel Sarwar said, "Nobody wants to have controversy for the sake of controversy, nobody wants to have an assignment to

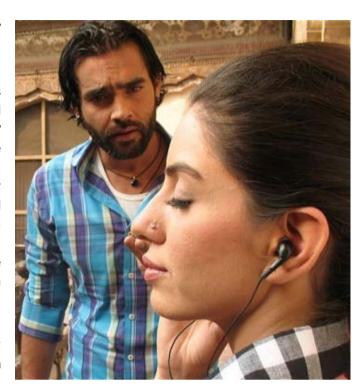
violence, nobody wants to push a button that would result in a disaster for anyone. But the truth has to come out somewhere. Where are we going to put a line in the sand and say, 'Look, this is what we are'?"

Although, this 26-episode series has been scheduled for September or October this year, but its news has already started generating debates in social media. In the comments section of The Dawn, a leading Pakistani newspaper, the news about Taan received mostly negative comments. One said, "What is this? Another sick twisting mind stunt by the liberal fascist elite minority." Another one commented, "Would not go into the religion debate as people link you to Taliban. But Why? Oh Why do you want to promote unnatural human behaviors? Why do you want to desensitize the young generation? Do people of Pakistan seriously want their children to grow up in such a society where taboo issues

are no longer taboo? Do we seriously want this? Why?"

Another, however, commented in a positive direction: "Don't you think that it is necessary to tackle important social issues and have a sincere, rational discussion about them? This show, to me, is an attempt to counter the influence of Islamic extremism and radicalism that has so strongly pervaded all aspects of our society. The very same extremism and radicalism that has propagated and normalized the idea that a scientific worldview is heretical, thus hindering any scientific progress that we might achieve. And god forbids you question anything you find unreasonable."

Now, how the audiences at large will receive this series is yet to be determined but one thing is for sure that it's going to create a debate and discussion anyways.





Chennai Celebrates LGBT Film Festival

In a traditionally conservative city, Chennai Rainbow Film Festival managed to generate appreciable press coverage, writes **Dhrubo Jyoti**



reating a new direction for the queer community in the city, the recently concluded Chennai Rainbow Film Festival broke barriers and forged bonds between marginalized sexualities and mainstream media and film-going audience. Featuring powerhouse performances and celebrity guest appearances, the festival was organized by Chennai Dost and Alliance Francaise de Madras from June 7-9. It ran into packed houses on all three days with over 700 in daily footfall enjoying the movie fare on offer.

The festival featured films in Tamil, Hindi, English and a multitude of foreign languages and screened over 30 films in all. 'Pizhai' - a tamil short film filmed by L.Rajkumar- won the Cinema Rendezvous Award, 'The Apple Tree', a 2012 film from the US about elderly LGBT people, won the best international film; 'Time out', a short film from India about the changing relationship between brothers, one of whom is gay, won the best national film; and; 'Kanna', a tamil film made by a film institute student, won the 'Links Ayub' Best Short Film Award.

The festival was also graced by legendary National Award winning film-maker Balu

Mahendra on the final day, who wished the CRFF the best of luck.

In addition to a delectable array of films, CRFF also honoured prominent activists and allies of the queer community with the Rainbow Ambassador awards. Actor and Politician Sarath Kumar was awarded for his film 'Kanchana', Priya Menon from Times of India was honoured for responsible journalism, Sanobar Sultana received the award for Best RJ from Chennai Live and Young Actor Ashwin received the award for 'Narthagi'.

CRFF also saw a vibrant panel discussion on the media portrayal of the LGBT community. Fathima Babu, TV news reader and actress, writer Charu Nivedita, actress and transgender activist Rose Venkatesan and gay rights activist Vikranth Prasanna debated the positives and negatives of current media trends.

In a traditionally conservative city, CRFF managed to generate appreciable press coverage with articles in most prominent regional and English dailies. It not only gave the community a social space to celebrate their identity, it also provided a much needed outreach to the mainstream media.

















In Conversation with Junaid Jahangir

On his recent visit to Pakistan, **Hadi Hussain** talked to Dr. Junaid Jahangir about his work, queer rights in Islam and homophobia within Muslim community (Edited by **Kyla Pasha**)

Allah made every color of the rainbow!



MUSLIMS FOR PROGRESSIVE VALUES

Dr. Junaid Jahangir is a Canadian educationist and researcher of Pakistani origin who is a Lecturer in Economics at MacEwan University in Alberta, Canada. He is a staunch supporter of both 'Muslims for Progressive Values' and 'Salaam Canada'. He is inspired by his friends at the Southminster-Steinhauer United Church, and aims to explore an expansive theology. He also works with Alabama based Dr. Hussein Abdul Latif on developing a renewed perspective on Muslim same-sex unions. His articles have appeared in Huffington Post Canada, Goat Milk, Chay Magazine and Edmonton Journal. His paper, 'Implied Cases for Muslim Same-Sex Union' was published in the 2nd volume of Islam and Homosexuality (2009).

Tell the readers of *Gaylaxy* why you chose to work in a religious paradigm to develop a case for same sex unions? What was your inspiration in this regard?

Although most of my work is about the status of Muslim queers within the framework of Islam, it doesn't limit my interests, as I have frequently written on Islamophobia, drone attacks, blasphemy laws and the persecution of religious minorities in Pakistan. These are

issues which have special significance for Pakistan and Muslims.

Having said that, the reason for centering my field of work on the religious paradigm was the lack of evidence-based research which can enable queer Muslims to overcome the apparent disparity between their religiousness and sexual orientation. So my work focuses on developing alternative interpretations of Islamic texts and

scriptures based upon Quran, Hadith literature and jurisprudence so that queer Muslims can deal with their inherent feelings of shame and guilt and achieve the physical and psychological well-being while incorporating their faith and sexual orientation in a healthy manner.

As far as inspiration is concerned, friends and allies at *Muslims for Progressive Values (MPV)* and *Southminster-Steinhauer United Church* inspired me to pursue an expansive theology on queer Islam. But still, my work is self-driven. I don't get paid for this work as it is a labor of love.

Who are the main contributors and allies for work regarding LGBT Muslims in North America?

Well, there are a lot of individuals who are contributing in one way or the other to Muslim queers through their writings, researches, workshops, public speaking and activism. Starting with Faisal Alam, (Founder, Al-Fatiha, an organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex & questioning (LGBTIQ) Muslims, and their allies), El Farouk Khaki (Founder of

Salaam: Queer Muslim Community & cofounder of el-Tawhid Juma Circle, a genderequal, queer-friendly, and religiously non-discriminatory group), *Imam Daayiee Abdullah* (imam and religious director of Masjid An-Nur Al-Isslaah, Washigton DC and Co-Director of Muslims for Progressive Values), *Scott Siraj al Haq Kugle* (eminent



Muslim scholar who wrote prolific book Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Muslims), Anila Muhammad (Co-Director of Muslims for Progressive Values), Pamela Taylor (Muslims for Progressive Values), Dr. Hussain Abdul Latif, (with whom I am collaborating to develop a case for same sex unions within the framework of Islam) and most recently Hassan el Menywai who wrote a dissertation on Same-Sex Marriage in Islamic Law. But other than these main contributors and allies, there are a lot of other unsung individuals who are directly or indirectly helping and supporting this cause.

Living as a person of color in Canada and working on the issues which are considered taboo even in Canada, what kind of problems does one face there?

It's true that living in a western country as an immigrant is sometimes difficult, especially

when you have an opinion which isn't even mainstream. Racism and Islamophobia can be the problems you face there as a Muslim and if you are a queer, then it further enhances your minority status. On one hand, queer Muslims face homophobia from some conservative

Muslim groups as well as some right wing groups while on the other hand, they can potentially face Islamophobia and racism from people who are xenophobic and racist.

So, what keeps you motivated in these circumstances?

Apart from friends and allies at *MPV* it's the criticism and negative feedback I sometimes receive which give me the kick I need to work more passionately. Whenever someone criticizes my articles or work, I take it as a



challenge and reassess my work with complete impartiality, then come back with another article as a reply. Also, at times when I receive supportive emails of individuals from different walks of life, even from the most religious and unexpected ones, I feel hopeful that change at some level is taking place and that there are some good people in this world who will stand by the oppressed in difficult times.

I am sure that you must have faced

resistance and backlash for your work from traditional Muslim scholars and religious bodies. Is there any other group which objected to your line of work?

Absolutely! The reaction of traditional and mainstream

Muslim community including some scholars and imams who are mostly of *Salafi* background was extremely negative and at times threatening. For them, talking about blasphemy laws or the rights of religious and sexual minorities is absolutely taboo and anyone trying to even start a discussion on them is sinful and a work of Satan. They believe that any discussion on taboo topics will harm Islam and create discord within the unity of Islam. Essentially for them, an ideology takes precedence over human suffering.

Other than them, the atheists respond back

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with severe backlash as they view my work with Islamic texts to be a way of creating and propagating religion. They also think it's a useless attempt to create a space within Islam for sexually diverse individuals.

Coming back and forth to Pakistan, what changes have you observed?

The main difference I observed during my recent visit to Pakistan was the religiously toned hate speech against women and minorities posted on many rickshaws. Like "Shareef auratain mardon kay maabeen nae qhoomti" (A respectable woman doesn't move among men) or "Moseegi shaitaan ka raag hai" (Music is Satan's raga) or "America ka jo yaar hai, ghaddar hai, ghaddar hai" (Whoever is friends with the US is a traitor to Pakistan). It seriously surprised me and made me realize that religious extremism is taking up most of the socio-cultural space within the country whereas space for alternate opinions and expressions is decreasing day by day. And the Salafi/Wahabi influence is the main cause of this religious indoctrination and insurgence. The most deplorable fact is the attitude of the government which is pretending to be unaware of all this.

Do you see any impact of your work in Pakistan?

Directly, I don't think so, but indirectly yes, to a limited extent. Most of my work is online and is in English, which creates a communication barrier for most Pakistanis. Only who can access and read my work can potentially be influenced. Also, I think the kind of work *O Pakistan* has been doing, especially their recent *Mujhay Tum Say Kuch Kehna Tha* (I wanted to tell you) campaign can make a huge impact on the queer folks here. I really appreciate the motivating and hopeful messages of support and solidarity which indeed seemed like a heart to heart conversation.

Where do you see yourself, and the kind of work you believe in, in next 10 years?

I see myself researching and writing on the issues which are developing substantial bodies of knowledge around my areas of interest: queer Muslims, religious minorities and euthanasia. I also see the MPV getting stronger and the establishment of more queer friendly and gender equal religious spaces like El-Tawhid Juma Circle in Toronto and the Inclusive Mosque Initiative in Paris. In the Muslim world, I see a lot of potential in Turkey and Lebanon which are more progressive and secular than other Islamic countries. Many queer rights organizations and forums are already doing wonderful work there. Unfortunately, I don't see Pakistan making a similar kind of progress but let's hope for the best.

Any message to the readers of Gaylaxy?

My message will be what Dr. Seuss, a renowned American writer, poet and cartoonist once wrote: "Be who you are and say what you feel, those who mind, don't matter, those who matter, don't mind."



Brown, Gay, and Muslim in America



André Jennings, a student of University of Maryland University College and a gay South Asian activist, talks to Hassan Qudusi, a fellow South Asian about the challenges faced by a South Asian Muslim gay man in America

Living in America, we all have a story to share. I met up with my good, impeccably handsome friend **Hassan Qudsi** over a few drinks and a nice plate of chum chum to catch up, and also to talk about what it is like to be gay Muslim of South Asian origin in America.

André : Namaste Hassan, tell the readers a little bit about yourself.

Hassan: Namaste, well I am 24 years old, Indian, living in Maryland, and a pioneer for being a house husband. I am currently in school for marketing and product development. I have been in a relationship for over 2 years, and we are now living together. I enjoy being with friends and having a few cosmopolitans or a good Long Island iced tea.

André: Haha, who doesn't enjoy a good stiff drink. Have you ever experienced any prejudice in the LGBT community for being South Asian?

Hassan: I have not experienced anything negative but the LGBT community tends to stay within races, white with white, black with black, Asian with white, but around here it's not as big, and is not overly said. But you can see all around, many just stay in cliques.

André: I totally agree! It does seem around here there are a lot of cliques, and it can be hard to be invited into them. However, I do feel like it is slowly

changing, and more interracial cliques are forming. Do you feel it's hard to be gay, brown and Muslim?

d al e uu ee

Hassan: Oh my God yes! Being gay has its hardships. For a country that is changing there is daily discrimination. 'The white man is not kind to anything or anyone that is not white.' Coming from a part of the world where being gay is frowned upon, or believed that God's wrath will come upon you, it isn't exactly a walk in the park. Being gay, brown and Muslim is hard. The Muslim community actively tries to put you down, it's the same with any organized religion, being African American, gay and Baptist, or white, gay and Catholic; not so much being brown, gay and Hindu, although Muslim influences have made it difficult. It is a constant struggle with family and friends not being accepting. It seems easier to date a woman of a different race because she can be converted. My family thought it was a phase and that there is no validity in being openly gay. They surround themselves with people who are like minded,

although they claim I do the same. But being gay and Muslim is hard, and is hard for anyone in any post modern religion. It is a constant 60 degree uphill battle.

André: We all have different coming out stories, some peaceful and other horrifying. What was yours?

Hassan: During high school I started to come out to school friends, some godsiblings, and some family members that I knew were pretty cool, but others still don't know. My parents were and have been the hardest. After a long time searching the

internet looking on ways to tell them, I said "Zero fucks given" and at age 21 I finally told them. It has been difficult. They are at times still in denial, think it's a phase I am going through, and can't see past some

religious hang ups. At some times they seem okay with it and others times they are not. I created a support system with my boyfriend's friends and family, some of my friends and a few in my family.

André: What advice would you give to other gays or gaysi (gay Desi), as they are starting to come out, and open up about their sexuality?

Hassan: One advice I would give is when you have the chance, leave home. Whether it's going away to college or getting a good job, create your own life. Be self sufficient, create a support system, and just come out. Suppressing your feelings by graduating, getting married, and starting a family only to fill yourself with regret isn't worth it. Save yourself the trouble and just come out, it is better to do it earlier rather than later. Please accept yourself, and love yourself. As RuPaul said, "If you don't love yourself, how the hell you gonna love somebody else?" Also be free

without having someone dictating your life and your future. You must be comfortable with yourself and don't let others, especially family, force you to submit and get married.

André: In your own opinion do you think you can be both gay and Muslim?

Hassan: Now that is a tough one, there are two things *pak*(pure) and *napak* (impure). To be pure you must be heterosexually married with children. You can essentially be gay and Muslim, just the gay sexual relations are not pak, or someone being transgender. Being gay and 100% Muslim is damn near

impossible, because you will not achieve 100% in everything. The trick is to be spiritual but not a fanatic, just follow the teachings.

André: Have you ever felt that being both

American and South Asian we have a harder time with self perception and body image?

Hassan: Body image is a universal identity as one's self is defined by what's around you. Growing up, all I knew was Indian music and old Indian movies. Only when I started making friends I found American culture. However perception for me is not defined by how you grow up, but how I see myself now. Neither here nor there, but leaning more towards Desi.

André: Good way to look at it, I do feel you have so many pressures to be thin or muscular, or some crazed image in our heads from models and celebrities that we admire. You're coming up where the pressure to marry is at its highest. Are you pressurized to marry? And would you ever consider marrying a lesbian to appease your family?

Being gay, brown and Muslim

is hard. The Muslim

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accepting

Hassan: I am being pressured and there were times I did consider marrying a woman but now, no way. It is like lying to yourself and the other person. You have to live your life for self, and for your own happiness. It may seem selfish but it is better than getting married and living life as a lie. You just can't lose yourself in family pressures. It's not an easy task but life is not easy. You must love yourself and hold your ground.

André: Another big thing in the gay world is bullying and how it affects us all in a way. Were you bullied growing up? And if so was it because of race, religion, or sexual orientation?

Hassan: Yes, but not for any of the reasons listed. I was bullied because I was the small, scrawny, easily intimidated one. But that only was when I was young child. I was teased a little and called the gay kid and all but I always had a comeback line.

André: Recently I did an article on race and the gay world, have you ever experienced any animosity because you are in an interracial relationship? **Hassan:** No, I haven't really, though people do tend to stick with their own races. But it is more accepted, we are already gay so it really doesn't matter. You do see a lot of Arab and Indian guys with White people, but that's another story!

André: In your opinion what do you think it means to be gay and South Asian, and where do you think the future will be?

Hassan: Being gay and South Asian is like being gay and any race. And it shouldn't be any different. We should be noticed by our good deeds in society and not our ethnicity. I think the future would be gay desis who don't have prejudices against one another. And being gay will not have any label attached to it, like "here is my gay friend", but rather here is my friend Hassan. I think we will overcome our hesitations about coming out, and create a better support network. Also, to all those desi guys on Grindr, or Jack'd with no pic, just show yourself, those other guys are in the same situation as you. And don't pass up an opportunity to date or even be friends with another desi or desi adjacent guy.



A Final Goodbye

- Kaustav Manna

omeone, somewhere, once said, "We should not judge people unless we have walked in their psychological shoes." Today, when Rituparno Ghosh died I realized how true it is. Being reared by this patriarchal society, I was always taught to hate the one who rides against the tide. I was taught to hate Rituparno Ghosh by patriarchy. It's only now that I know he was right. He was way ahead of his time. The films he made, the statements he made, were all benevolent.

Today, when I first heard the news of his death, I was shocked and like everyone else found it hard to believe. All morning was spent sitting in front of the TV gazing at the screen in



disbelief. All this time I didn't care about him. I suppose the society taught me so. But today, when I heard so many people and saw so many people mourning his death, I realized, he was, after all someone not to be hated. Comments of his colleagues, about how loving and caring he was, made me realize we all are of the same kind. Instead of discriminating, we must embrace all with an open mind. Finally, foundations of patriarchy in me were drowned in the tears of thousands of human beings out there mourning his death and I decided to pay a final tribute to him.

I soon found myself dressing up and leaving for Nandan. I always wanted to meet Rituparno but I had never thought it would be like this! Hundreds of people had queued up to pay tribute to him. It was a massive queue. But, astonishingly, there was no pushing or shoving in the queue. For once a Bengali crowd was a disciplined crowd. The crowd moved at a steady pace. I soon reached the steps of Nandan, I could smell the burning incense and hear Rabindrasangeet in the background and I thought how appropriate it was! Soon, I was standing in front of his body. The body which was criticized and questioned over and over again. I looked at his still face. It was as if he was dreaming a happy dream, a dream of a society where there are no boundaries be it linguistic or cultural or national or sexual. As if he is dreaming of a place where there are no prejudices, no judgements. There are only human beings and equality and freedom. Freedom to choose - to be who you are.

There was a sense of peace.

FIGHT FOR FLIGHT



Bharathi narrates his childhood experience of growing up gay in a small town and his will to fight that helped him survive

If I had access to a gun anytime when I was growing up, I would have put that gun to my head and gladly pulled the trigger anytime to save me from the hate that surrounded me.

My earliest memory of bullying is when I was in my fourth grade, when I was barely 9 years old. My peers were a part of day to day taunting but the most scarred event that comes to my mind was not through my fellow students but my teacher - a Christian teacher who came to supervise us for my annual exam. That memory is still too painful to dwell into even two decades later. I still remember the shame and the humiliation. I ran crying from my annual exam hall to go to my own class teacher. She did not know what to do. I was happy that it was the last day of the academic year and I did not have to go back and live through my humiliation again for another 2 months. I didn't talk about this to anyone else, not even my own family, because it was supposed to be a shameful thing. When I entered my 5th grade I was dreading which teacher was I going to get again. Well I didn't get lucky when I got another bible thumper as a teacher who, on my first day of fifth grade, made sure that everyone else knew that I did not belong in their normal world.

My 5th grade was the worst in my life. I dreaded that monster every time she walked into the class. The whole year I had to endure insults delivered in a matter of fact way, which the other kids picked up and used for the rest of the day. Every day brought a new ordeal and it destroyed my confidence; my childhood; my innocence. There were a lot of good days but the terrible ones were always around the corner. I survived through it. The next year I changed school. The next two years I even forgot the fact that I was different. I was a star student, always on top of my class. I was a teacher's pet and I always made great grades. Then again I changed to another school in my 8th

This time it was merciless and cruel and that was when the thought of ending my life came to me for the first time. But I was a coward not to attempt to kill myself and I am happy for that now.



s That was the time I also realized cannot carry this burden; I cannot live

So I went back to my old school when I was in my 9th grade. This time the kids had matured and they knew a different person when they saw one. The scars of my 9th grade were so deep that I secretly wished that a car knocks me off my bicycle on my way to school and all of this might end. When I entered my 10th grade that is when I found out that I can fool others into thinking that I was just like them - the normal straight guy. I started changing every ounce of me, the way I walk, the way I talk and the way I think. I was not always successful, but it got a bit better. By my 12th grade I had figured out another trick, to befriend the popular girl and make others think that there was something between the two of us. It worked; people were too busy gossiping rather than pick on me or think that I was different. When I entered my college I knew for sure that I am not straight but I didn't acknowledge it, rather didn't want to acknowledge it, as I was busy protecting myself again. This time I made sure no one picks on me. I was 18 and I guess I got clever.

I distracted the dumb people around me so that they won't find out. Again it worked most of the time but there were a lot of people who saw through my defenses and made sure that they had their fun just hurting me.

That was the time I also realized that I cannot carry this burden; I cannot live this lie the rest of my life, afraid of every move I make, afraid that someone will find out. There were times I asked, "Find out what? The most important part of me; the very essence of my being?" I realized that I had to leave that horrible small minded town but I was stuck in a college curriculum for six years.

If this world, in all its glory, makes a nine year old kid so scared that he fears getting up from his bed and face a new day each morning then there is something horribly wrong with this world.

> Then one day a miracle happened. When I was 19 years old, I saw Will and Grace on an English channel. I immediately knew who I was. A sense of relief swept over me. I knew I wasn't alone in this forsaken world. I could relate to the people on television than to anyone I had known in my entire life. Fear gripped me again; may be my friends will find out about me if they saw Will And Grace. It was also the time that I realized that there is a world out there thousands of miles apart, a land where people like William Truman, people like me gays; can live with respect and dignity - being their authentic self. It gave me hope and I was determined that whatever happens I will try to make my life in America



I am there right now, in America, the land of dreams. Things haven't worked out yet but reaching here has given me hope, courage and a new determination to succeed. I am not sure of what will happen next but I am sure of one thing. I will fight till my last breath to achieve the happiness that is due to me. This time I will fight for everyone like me who are trapped in their own mother land surrounded by hate. I will make sure that I will do my part to give them hope.

If this world, in all its glory, makes a 9-year old kid so scared that he fears getting up from his bed and face a new day each morning, then there is something horribly wrong with this world. If this world, with all its kindness, makes an eighth grader contemplate ending his life just because of who he is then there is something horrendously wrong with this world. If this world, with all its empathy, kills the innocence of a kid and makes him lie to himself and deny his true being and carry a burden so heavy that he can't even breathe, then there is something obscenely wrong with this world. And if this world, with all its morality, wants a reason why that kid is gay rather than accept him for who he is, then there is something sinfully wrong with this world.



That 9 year old is not wrong; that ninth grader is not wrong; and I am not wrong. I am not the sinner and I am not going to be ashamed of who I am. I am gay and I am proud of that.

I am proud of my history - the gay rights movement. We, the gays, have overcome discrimination. We, the gays have triumphed hate. We, the gays have shattered myths and prejudices. We, the gays, have survived a plague. We will not stop fighting until every kid who is different feels safe. We will not stop until every innocence is cherished. We will not stop until every life is valued. We will not stop fighting - not now not ever. I will not stop.



SECTION 377:

From Criminals to Sexual Objects

From emerging class differences to sexual objectification of gay men, there have been a lot of changes since the decriminalization of homosexuality, observes **Dr. Himadri Roy**

nd July, 2009, Thursday - Judgment Day. Yes, as the news broke out, closeted LGBT people of the city jumped with joy. A jubilant pride followed that Sunday with sweat dripping down the nape of hordes of participants, including me. Imagine the sultry weather of Delhi! People still didn't hesitate to greet each other without even being familiar. But who cared! At least everyone was happy to be gay as the harassment of the cops would stop—free cruising in the parks and public loos, no shying away from colorful pants and gaudy jewelry, no hesitations to do muah-muahs and hugging friends in public places. Everyone around suddenly seemed to have developed a different attitude.

Days passed by and this attitude drew

lines of differences- class consciousness and beauty tinged with glamour. One started feeling strong about one's looks and splurging money for brands -yes capitalism hit the market soon. Gays from every nook and corner didn't even think twice before buying expensive CK underwear or such brands which would keep them in high pedestal when they unzipped. Visiting spas and discs were now a part of life. The gaze of the public changed abhorrence to awe, parents/family who shouted about unnecessary expenses. The gay response was simply rebellious, "My money so lemme do whatever I want to!" Subtly, but gruesomely, moral ethics vanished off. Every gay man's family in the city had such squabbles and



Personals

arguments but no one dared to say or discuss openly what their sexuality was, and why they were revolting like this. As always, family would never talk about such things, moreover, discussing sexuality or sex isn't part of family morality in this country. Not returning home from late night parties, or returning late from hook-ups at cruising areas or new sex-dates became a scheduled lifestyle. Visiting the gym and getting a toned body like film stars and gyrating like them became a fad for everyone. While the public gaze was still of awe, among the younger generation things slowly changed. Their gaze carried a sense of envy and insecurity.

To make things more open for every reader, cyber dating whooshed up immediately from gay sites to common ones like Facebook. Facebook pages and groups opened up catering to the LGBT people, so everyone got a ticket to enter that exclusive domain and poor gay men felt a sense of pride that they can change the mind-set of everyone. Cruising shifted to Facebook and many of the gay men started dating them- if things work out why not sex? Soon it was hard for everyone to figure out what their orientation was, till the desires and urges were accomplished. No headaches and no strings attached became the modus operandi for such dates, and the result was a sense of pride that one has dated a straight man and "made" him bi-sexual- Wow, what an achievement! Poor us, forgetting what Freud had said 'Every damn man is a bisexual'. Most men had and will always be promiscuous and their sexuality has nothing to do with it. And soon the gaze changed from sense of envy to objectification of such men who were conspicuous in public.

As days rolled by, sex for gay men became an easily available thing at every nook and corner of the city. Before the Judgment day, one needed to think twice before approaching someone in a crowded metro or a DTC bus or even in a fancy mall. Only voyeuristic pleasures could be derived by standing close to them or peeping to glance at the object of fantasy in the posh mall loos. But still a sense of fear haunted the mind all the

time. Now it seemed a bindaas-mentality hovered around the object of fantasy till there were blatant rejections/denials. Seeking love now became a dreamland desire that could never result from sex-dates and could never be achieved. But still gay men felt, 'It's better to have something than nothing at all; what's the harm to have sex-dates than long-term relationships?' This kind of temperament drove today's gay men to live life at their own terms -from breaking all traditions in conventional family set-ups to friendly environment. Those men who didn't believe in these thoughts and principles of life aren't part of the friend circle. But interestingly, all this occurs till middle age knocks their doors. Till then life should be enjoyed to the fullest.

Now the scenario is such that if one stares back more than once at another young man driving his bike, or the co-commuter, or the spectator next to you at the Cineplex, the response turns out to be positive in most cases. The response can be shocking at times -one biker followed my car till a traffic signal and handed me over his phone number and zoomed off, another liked the tight trousers on my butts and made me feel his throbbing erection in a crowded Metro and slipped a chit of paper into my pocket before vanishing in the crowd; another pulled my hand in a Metro station and wrote his phone number on it and went away. None of them are probably gay or bisexual.

These makes one ponder - What is it that is running behind the mind? Is it bi-curiosity? But then the statistics of bi-curious men would reach the top of the cartography sheet. Or is it simply that gay men have become the most desirable object for sex? Who knows the answer! If this is true then the conclusion is logical that Judgment day has converted every gay man into a sexual object and an object to be dragged to bed for fulfillment of the mortal desires. And interestingly, all gay men feel a sense of pride in acquiring this position amongst the masculine world and beating their counterparts -the women -to nothingness. Kudos! Cheers to the Judgment then!

Review:

THE CITY OF DEVI — Manil Suri

Amongst gay fiction by Indian authors, Manil Suri's book clearly stands out by not being apologetic or boring, writes **Sukhdeep Singh**

et in the future in a world torn apart by terror attacks, The City of Devi begins by telling about the imminent nuclear attack that is to annihilate the city of Mumbai in a few days. While most of the residents have evacuated the city, there are a few who either could not leave, or believe that the city's Devi will protect them all. Amidst them is Sarita, who even in the war ravaged city, is searching for a Pomegranate that she believes will help her reunite with her husband Karun. But she is not the only one who is searching for Karun. Eijaz, or Jaz (or Jazter as he calls himself) is also on the lookout for Karun and would go to any lengths to find him.

While Sarita is a faithful wife.. Jaz is slave to his desires and needs to find a *shikaar* every now and then

The once communally harmonious city of Mumbai has been torn apart into a city of Hindus and Muslims, where only mistrust rules the hearts of people. This destruction of the secular fabric started when a movie called Super Devi- about Mumba Devi protecting Mumbai from evil- becomes a superhit. The Hindu Right Wing sees a chance to paint the whole city saffron by cashing in on the popularity of the movie. The riots that engulf the city change the total demographic of various parts, and while the affluent Muslims, like Jaz's parents

move to safer countries, those who cannot prefer to find strength in numbers and move to Muslim localities

While Sarita, a statistician, is a faithful wife who will take on any challenge to get to her husband and is patient to let him take his own time before consummating the marriage, Jaz is slave to his desires and needs to find a *shikaar* every now and then, so much so that he is ready to have sex with the son of his landlady when his love Karun is away for some days. Not the kind who would fall in love, Jaz surprises himself when





he is drawn to the gentle Karun. When Karun leaves him on discovering his infidelity, Jaz, despite his best efforts, cannot seem to

move on and decides to trace Karun back and returns into the life of Karun. When Karun suddenly disappears in this mayhem, the best chance that he has is to follow

Sarita, who is also on the trail of her husband.

Even though Karun is not in the picture most of the times, his presence can be felt throughout the book. The author also beautifully brings out the emotions a woman undergoes when she discovers that all the dreams she wove around her husband, were never hers at the first place. Karun, as the closet gay man who marries an unsuspecting girl because he cannot see a future with another guy in this society, represents the many Indian gay men who take a similar path in life. Jaz, as the

relentless lover and also as the hunter hunting for a shikaar, is adept at the game of cruising and represents a confident gay man-the kind who will hardly be ashamed of his sexuality or deeds. While most works by Indian authors often try to find a reason behind the homosexuality of the characters, or try and deal with too many issues abuse, coming out, societal and parental pressure- and turn into a boring/preachy work, The City of Devi is not at all apologetic even though it does deal with the issue of societal and parental pressures on a gay man.

The story is presented as narratives by both Sarita and Jaz, and constantly flips between the present and the past. Mr. Suri is able to punch in a lot of complex issues be it about communalism and the effects it can

> have on the fabric of the country, to terrorism and the use of internet to spread rumours, to the gullibility of people in terms of religion, and of course, the issues facing a closet gay Indian man

and the effects he has on the lives of those surrounding him when he gets married to a girl.

By keeping it as a narrative by both Sarita and Jaz, Mr. Suri brings out the emotions of both the characters, especially the wife who remains unheard in most gay novels. Some scenes, like that of the trio having sex together are a bit too dramatic though. The book keeps you hooked throughout, touches upon a lot of issues, yet doesn't bore you at all. Amongst the gay fictions by Indian authors, this one clearly

stands out.

By keeping it as a narrative

by both Sarita and Jaz, Mr.

Suri brings out the emotions

of both the characters,

especially the wife who

remains unheard in most gav

novels

MY BESCUER - SITHARA APPUKUTTAN

I sit aside the window

Gazing at the dark blue sky

I wonder as I look at the stars

Your glossy mysterious dark brown eyes must be also watching them

As I lean out of the window, the cold breeze kissing my face

I can feel your breath in it.

And I wonder have our breaths got united!

Will your soul wander in the night to meet mine??

As I have only my soul left.

They ate my flesh...

They handled me like a piece of meat

But they can never take my soul away from me.

I have hid it behind my flesh, just for you...

I wait here for you in the prison of these animals

For your gentle touch

So my body can melt off its pain

Come and discover my soul.

The pain engraved in my soul will flow away when your soul meets mine

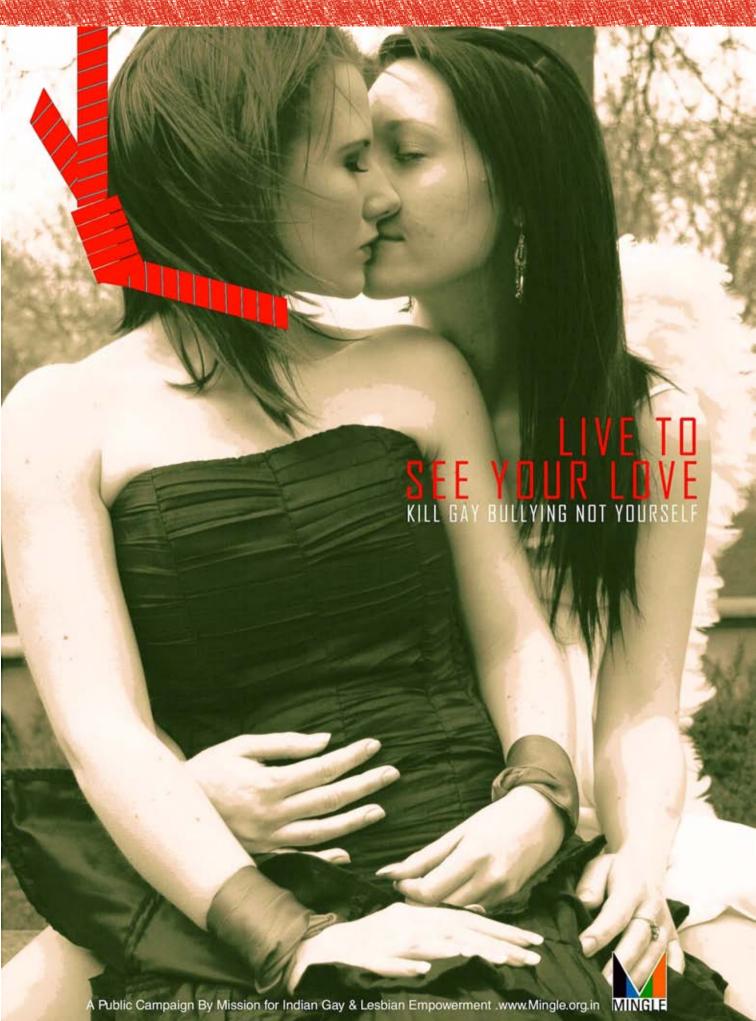
Please come soon

Look deep into my watery eyes, you can see my soul being shattered..

Before my soul dies, rescue me from this prison...

Rescue me..





7055 POST GROUP? FOR LEST

WEST BENGAL

THE PRATYAY GENDER TRUST

Contact person: Anindya Hajra Address: 293 Jodhpur Park, Calcutta, Pin 700 068

Phone: 033 2464 1893

E-mail:

pratyaygendertrust@yahoo.co.in

Target populations: Hijras, MSM (particularly kotis)

DURBAR MAHILA SAMANWAYA COMMITTEE

Contact person: Mrinal Kanti

Address: 12/5 Nilmoni Mitra Street, Kolkata

West Bengal, India

Phone: 033 2543 7451 / 7560,

+91-33 2530 3148

Email: dmsc@durbar.org

Website:

http://www.durbar.org/

Target populations: Female, Male and Transgender sex workers

SAATHII CALCUTTA

Contact person: Pawan Dhall,

Chief Coordinator

Address: 229 Kalitala Main Road, Purbanchal (N), Kolkata

Pin 700 064

Phone: 033 2484-4835

E-mail: saathii@yahoo.com / pawan30@yahoo.com

Website: www.saathii.org Target populations: MSM in general, male sex workers, transgender people, bisexuals

Sappho

Contact person : Malavika **Address:** 11A Jogendra Gardens(South), Ground Floor, Kolkata, Pin 700 078

Phone: 033 2441 9995

Email: malvi99@hotmail.com , sappho1999@rediffmail.com Website:

http://sapphokolkata.org/ **Target Population:** Lesbians and bisexual women

Prantik Bongaon

Contact person: Niloy Basu Address: C/o Niloy Basu, Peada

Phone: 91 3251 257 029.

E-mail: ajnil@rediffmail.com / ajnil123@rediffmail.com

Target populations: Hijras, Kothis, MSM in general

Northern Black Rose

Contact person: Souvik Ghosal Address: C/o Hori Roy, M. B. Mukherjee Nursing Home, Hill Cart Road, Rajani Bagan, Khudiram Palli, Silliguri 734 401

Phone: 91-9433009116

E-mail:

northenblack rose@yahoo.co.in

Target populations: Hijras, Meitis, other sexual minorities, Astitva Dakshin

Contact person: Debasish Mitra Address: C/o Bablu Bajikar, Baruipur Ukilpara, Kolkata 700144 Phone: 91-9836185589, 9830837440

E-mail: astitvadakshin@yahoo.co.in Target populations: Hijras,

Madhya Banglar Sangram

Contact person : Arunava Nath

Address: Kazi Ali Aftab Vill. Goaljan, P.O. Radharghat, P.S.

Berhampore

Phone: 91 9932760967,

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SWIKRITI

Contact person: Raiarshi Chakraborty, Secretary

Address: 42/57 DumDum Road, Kolkata 700074

Phone: +91 9831743608,

E-mail

Target populations: Bisexual

PEOPLE LIKE US (PLUS)

Contact person : Agniva Lahiri Address: 254, Bonomali Bannerjee Road, Kolkata -700082, West Bengal, India **Phone:** 033 2402 9305

E-mail: pluskolkata@gmail.com Target populations: Support group for young gender variants

SWAPNIL

Contact person: SUMAN

RUDRA

Address: Kotalhat Dist-Burdwan, P.O. Burdwan, Pin 751015, West Bengal

Phone: 09932241372

E-mail:

swapnil burdwan@yahoo.co.in Target populations: MSM &

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Address: Samapathik Trust, 1004 Budhwar Peth, Office No. 9, 3rd Floor, Building Name: Rameshwar Market, Pune

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